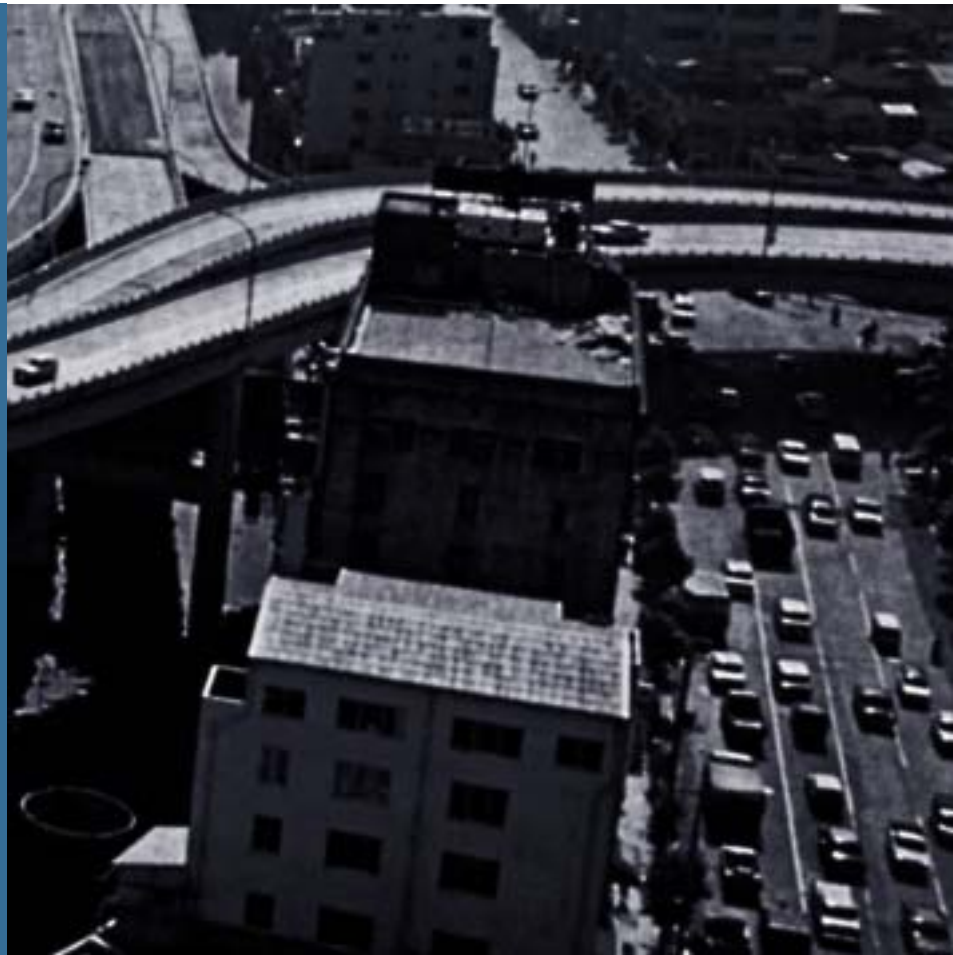


Advice for parents and carers

The following pages are based on a booklet originally produced in collaboration with Family Rights Group, a British advice line service. The text summarises the research findings as a narrative and includes comments and observations from family members who have been through the reunification process. The words are available from the website [www. dartington-i.org](http://www.dartington-i.org) in a format suitable for simple office printing or for copying into an agency's own information materials.



Parting always hurts,
but don't let yourself
be defeated by
it—there are things
you can do to help.

There is no hiding the fact that being parted from a child is an unhappy experience. Even if you think it is for the best, or you have resigned yourself to accepting someone else's advice, the reality of parting is likely to be difficult to come to terms with. Goodbyes are often said in fraught circumstances, particularly if the separation goes against your wishes. Even if you understand why it has happened, you will not be the first to have been distressed by how a child left home – in tears or blank silence. And, just as likely, you will feel abandoned: your child's needs may have been carefully attended to – but what about your own? Whatever the circumstances, if your memories of the separation are bad, you may feel reluctant to co-operate with social services or to have much to do with the plans being made for your child. You may find the whole business so painful that you want to withdraw from your child's life altogether for a time. It is a natural reaction, but there are still things you can do to help.

It is very likely that
your child will come
home soon and that
things will work out
well.

The great majority of children looked after by social services eventually return home. The English research reported here found it was as many as nine out of ten: three out of four were back before six months had elapsed – many within a matter of just a few days. Of those away after six months, two out of five returned in the following 18 months, and of those still separated at two years one in three went home before five years was up. True, the likelihood of return is greatest during the first three months and there is reason to worry if relationships are left to decay; nevertheless, the odds for return stay surprisingly constant, even for difficult adolescents long away. However badly you feel about what is happening, by your own actions you can make it more likely that your child will come home and that things will work out well.

Always make the most of the chance to talk to social work staff and tell them how you feel.

However hard you may have found it to be parted from your child or how angry you feel, it is vital that you and social services find a way of working together. It does not mean the responsibility for making a success of things is all yours: social workers want children to come home to their families, too. They know that if the time away is used well, families will not feel cast adrift, and that it will improve the chances of a swift and lasting reunion. If there are other problems at home, try to find someone who will listen and might be willing to help. If no one comes to mind, check the local phone book for a family centre or an advice hotline or ask your social worker who you might talk to. You may have the right to attend planning and review meetings and Child Protection Conferences: don't waste the chance to be heard (an interpreter can very likely be found for you if it is known that you need one). If you feel nervous, take a friend along to keep a note of what is said, or ask permission to make a tape recording. It is difficult for anyone feeling nervous to remember everything that happens at a meeting.

Think of ways to show how much everyone in your family is concerned about your child's future.

The important thing is to show that you are determined not to let your relationship with your child break down. The same goes for the other members of the family: the professionals have a duty to consult them, too; if they are able to visit, phone or write, it will show that there are others who care and reunion will become more likely. If the relationship between you and your child is strong, there is a much greater chance that he or she will return home quickly. People in social work understand that family life does not have to be easy or particularly comfortable for relationships to be strong. Always seek advice if you do not agree with what social services say. A few circumstances are always likely to prolong separation: for example, when children are known to have been seriously abused or neglected by their parents, or when

However long you are parted, there should be something at home that your child can call his or her own.

information comes to light while children are away about a possible risk of abuse or neglect. So, if you stand in the way of social services when they ask for access to your child or the rest of your family, or whenever they seek your co-operation, they may start to think you aren't ready to have your child back. If you feel unable to do what is being asked of you, you will need to find support for your point of view.

It helps children to settle if they can pick up the thread of the life they were leading at home before they went away. They need to feel in touch with old friends, that they still have a role in the family and that there is a corner in the home – perhaps just a bed and a few prized belongings – they can call theirs.

It is important to children that the different parts of their life seem to add up to a continuous story. It helps if they take some favourite possessions with them wherever they go – toys, photographs, tapes and CDs perhaps. Then there are the roles everyone plays in the soap opera of home life, such as laying the table, feeding the cat or answering the phone, which children coming home need to feel able to resume. After a short absence this may not be too hard to make happen, but children gone longer will have grown up: they will want to feel they belong, but they can't be expected to play quite the same part as before. They will need time to adjust and you can help by thinking of different things they might do to maintain a role. You won't get the balance right straight away so keep trying!

A successful return will take time. There are five or six quite distinct stages in the process, rather like episodes in a television serial. The stories researchers are told about them are always different, but usually there are common threads...

I know it's awful but we've got used to him being away and enjoy his coming home for short stays. The thought of having him back for good worried us: all the noise, washing, cost, getting him up for school. We couldn't sleep all night worrying about what to do and could we cope.

I remember exactly how I felt. I've only ever felt like it once before. My father died one March when we were young and everyone was very kind. They said everything would be all right and we'd got the light nights to look forward to! But I remember, after the funeral, everyone just went. Me and my sisters and my mother were left sitting there to face everything with no money or anything. That's what it was like when I heard they wanted Christopher to come home; I was suddenly frightened and felt I'm on my own.

Getting ready

Children often visit at weekends before they come to stay permanently. It helps if these visits go well, but you should not mistake them for the real thing. Social services may have said your child can come home, but may have left the actual date rather vague. Try to persuade the social worker to give you a firm date so that you can make plans. It doesn't help anyone if it seems that to return home is just to drift back aimlessly.

It is quite common for families, children, foster carers and social workers to become anxious as the going home day draws near. For parents, a child's homecoming often means extra responsibility and expense. Social workers worry that something may go wrong and that doubt may then be cast on their professional judgement. Foster carers who are being asked to part from a child may feel distressed. Children will want to come home, but there will be things they will be sad to leave behind.



I had this idea it would be like something out of the movies with violins and everybody happy and we wanted to make a fuss but it wasn't really like that. It was all a bit empty really, I can't explain it to you.

It all came flooding back to me. I didn't know what set me off. I was nervous and I opened the door and he was standing there in his school uniform looking all smart and I thought, I should never have let him go, what was I thinking of, letting him go; and I thought never again, you're never going to leave me again. And I was crying my heart out and holding him tight; I don't think he knew what was happening but he was a bit tearful too. It was supposed to be a happy moment and it was really, but I was in a terrible state.

I felt all this love brimming up but I couldn't say anything. I had a list of things I wanted to say about how it was partly me that had done wrong in the past and how I was going to make a fresh start, but when he came in I was sort of speechless. And he didn't seem to notice me at all and after ten minutes I lost my temper and told him off because he hadn't wiped his feet.

The big day

More tears will probably be shed at the moment of reunion than on the day of parting. Some harsh feelings are likely to have been hovering in the background of family life throughout a child's absence: parents may feel guilty; children may feel they have been let down; high hopes, such as 'it will be so much better now' may be unrealistic. But, just as it helps to have a definite day for the homecoming, it is a good idea to have a small celebration to mark the occasion.

For a homecoming to be successful, things don't have to go exactly to plan, but it is important to get the pace right. If you feel that too much is being demanded of you too soon, tell your social worker. It is perfectly reasonable to want time to adjust, but if you seem to falter but do not say why, you may give the impression that you don't want your child home after all.

Children who have been long away frequently come home to a changed family; if there are new step-parents or children in the household, it will be a difficult time for them as well. They may feel like strangers; they may not be in the right frame of mind to make friends. Everyone needs time to settle.

It was all very nice and I tried to be as nice as I could. But if I'm really honest with you I'd have to say really I felt a bit pushed out. You see, before it was our house, me and the wife, but suddenly on that day I felt I was in somebody else's home again.

It's like the birth – it's marvellous when it's over and in the hospital but when you're home and it's feeding and changing nappies all day and all night it suddenly hits you.

Before I went away I used to like sitting by myself and reading, not bothering nobody. And this used to drive her (his mother) mad – she couldn't stand it. Then this week, same again – I'm reading and she's sitting across the room and she says 'You've got so much patience'. It was embarrassing really but I was amazed – it was the first time she'd said anything nice to me.

Home sweet home

When children come home, there is likely to be a period when everyone is on best behaviour, full of the moment, trying hard to make the reunion a success. For as long as it lasts, a few hours or several months, behaviour which would normally irritate will seem tolerable. Children will often be more helpful; parents will be more easy-going and generous with their time; brothers and sisters will be unusually pleasant to each other. It will not stay this way for ever!



Well it started with Karen wanting to come with me to the disco; she'd been with me three times since she was back and I was beginning to hope I could go by myself for a change. We had a bit of a to-do about it; then I says she can please herself. Then she said she wasn't coming 'cos I showed her up; she was calling me a slag trying to get off with men at the disco. And next thing I'm telling her she's a fucking bitch for making that accusation against her dad and she's saying, 'you should have believed me... why did you let me go?' and before you know we're throwing things at each other and she buggers off. I didn't see her for two days; God knows where she got to.

The argument

Episode 3 will probably come to an end with an argument. Usually it will be started by something quite trivial, to do with territory (somebody going into somebody else's room or using their belongings without asking) or with role (doing something someone else thinks they should do, or refusing to do something). The explosion will usually bring to the surface much deeper problems to do with the pain of being separated, and in the heat of the moment hurtful things may be said. But the perfect reunion is always a fantasy. Things are much less likely to work out well if hurt feelings are kept bottled up.



You cannot go back. You cannot turn the clock back. When I look back and see what I allowed to happen I still wince; I think 'Oh no'. But it's done, and over the last six months we've got over some of the problems... No, I wouldn't say we've talked properly but it's come up now and then. I tell him about how things got too much for me and he tells me about how he loved the children's home or hated the foster home. It's not a cure but it certainly helps.

Well, I wouldn't like to go through all that again and it was hell at the time. I'd even go as far as saying it was worse than the day he went away. You saw what was happening to us; all the rows and things. But I can see that there was a point to it all: we cleared a lot of stuff out of the way, we know where we stand with each other, and I know it will never be the same again but we know at least, and I think (the social worker) agrees, that we all belong together, back here together.

Working things out

If, as usually happens, Episode 4 has had the effect of clearing the air, you should by now be able to begin to adjust to a new pattern of family life rooted in the ordinary world of good days and bad days, excitements and scares. Social services will probably be less involved by this stage and may not seem to be offering you very much in the way of support – partly because they will want to feel that the reunion is succeeding without them. Do not be afraid to ask if you need help.



Living together

Is it possible to judge the quality of family life? Probably not, but social workers are bound to try to do something of the sort. They may wish to ask three kinds of question. Firstly: do you and your children share a sense of belonging? do you care for each other? Secondly there are more everyday considerations: are you able to meet your children's needs by seeing them safely to school and looking after their health? Thirdly, your family's ability to cope at the simplest practical level, including financially, has to be taken into account. In general:

- be prepared for the anxieties that are part of getting back together and for the arguments that are certain to follow
- reassure yourself and everyone in your family that friction need not spoil a successful reunion; it is a part of every healthy relationship
- try to discuss your fears with your social worker and encourage her or him to take the needs of all the members of your family into account when making plans
- try to find others to talk to who may have had similar experiences.

